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Mid-degree work placements can boost chances of getting a 2.1 or first

Ian Crawford & Zhiqi Wang

With the university summer holidays now in full swing, many second-year students will be gearing up to start their first day at work in September instead of heading back to lectures. Sandwich years – a one-year work placement at a company that counts towards a degree course – have become a popular part of many university courses.

Our [recent research](#) on accounting and finance graduates found that a year-long work placement sandwiched between their second and third years can boost chances of getting a good degree – a 2.1 or a first. UK students who did a sandwich year are 12 times more likely to obtain a good degree than those who didn't, while international students are three times more likely to obtain one.

In the increasingly competitive graduate job market, a [majority of UK graduate employers](#) now require at least a 2.1. Work placements are becoming essential tools in assisting graduates to secure a good job before graduation. Despite this, it appears that [fewer courses](#) are offering sandwich years than they have in the past.

According to a 2014 graduate market report by [High Fliers Research](#) The Times top 100 UK graduate employers have confirmed that a record 37% of this year's entry-level positions are expected to be filled by graduates who have already worked for their organisations – either through paid internships, industrial placements or vacation work. A significant number of top jobs are therefore not open to other students from the "Class of 2014".

Job prospects for international students

Most current [research](#) suggests that work placements both [academically](#) and professionally benefit UK students. But it's also important to look at the impact of placements on international students who study in Britain.

There were [425,265 international students](#) from both within and outside of the European Union, studying in the UK in 2012-13. A [number of studies](#) have shown they fare [much worse academically](#) than UK students in higher education. That will in turn disadvantage international students in the job markets.

But employment prospects are high on the list of priorities when international students choose the host country for their degree. The 2012 [National Union of Students International Students' Employability](#) survey reveals that more than 50% of international students expected a UK degree to improve their employment prospects both locally and globally.

Better marks if you're willing to work

So far, very limited research has been conducted to understand the effects of work placements on the academic performance of international students. Our study is the first research to investigate and measure the benefits of work placements on their academic results.

We looked at 268 accounting and finance students who studied in four cohorts at the University of Bath between 2006 and 2009. Of these, 114, or 43% chose to take a year-long industry placement during their degree – so-called “sandwich students” – while 154 remained as full-time students.

Bath has a long tradition of providing accounting and finance students with excellent placement opportunities in well-known accounting firms and investment banks both in the UK and across Europe and in China. Professional and specialised personnel are employed to ensure high-quality placements and matches between students’ interests and the needs of companies.

Our study found that UK sandwich students are academically better than UK full-time students throughout their study period. Those students who did a year placement in industry significantly outperformed those who didn’t – both before they did the placement and after. After controlling for gender, prior academic qualification and achievement, they got 8.30 more marks out of 100 in their final year than those who didn’t go on a placement.

But interestingly, they also got higher marks beforehand – 5.34 more in their first year and 6.17 more in their second year. So, given their higher likelihood of getting good marks, it is not surprising that UK sandwich students were 12 times more likely than UK full-time students to obtain a good degree.

Fewer rewards for international students

When we looked at international students, the significant mark difference between sandwich and full-time students only appeared after they spent a year in an industry placement. International sandwich students obtain approximately five more marks in the final year than international full-time students. They are more than three times more likely to achieve a good degree than international students who didn’t do a placement.

UK students clearly benefit more from placements than international students – scoring a significant 5.25 more marks than international students in their final-year exams. Although it is still unclear about the underlying reasons for this, it is likely to be a mixture of language and cultural skills, and the qualifications the student took before university.

In an interesting finding of our study, it seems that international students get better marks in an UK degree if they arrive at the course with the same educational background as their UK co-students. Those international sandwich students with school qualification other than A Levels (such as international and European baccalaureates) get 11.67% fewer marks on their final-year grade.

In other words, for international students, work placements can improve their final degree mark but students with A level experience are better placed to effectively and efficiently transfer knowledge from workplace to university.